

Readings for the Gathering

Hebrew Bible

A Time for Everything

Ecclesiastes 3: 1-13

³ There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens:

² a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, ³ a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, ⁴ a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ⁵ a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, ⁶ a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ⁷ a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, ⁸ a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace. ⁹ What do workers gain from their toil? ¹⁰ I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹ He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet^[a] no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end. ¹² I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³ That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

Gospel

The Magi Visit the Messiah

Matthew 2: 1-10

² After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: ⁶ "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel." ⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." ⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

Contemporary reading

'Matariki and Winter Solstice'

by Lynne O'Brien with thanks to Juliet Batten & Museum of NZ

Winter solstice or Yule falls on the 21st June. Matariki – this year – began Tuesday 25 June and ends 3 July. Like many winter solstice festivals celebrated around the world at this time, both place a strong emphasis on honouring the ancestors, hope – symbolized by the flame of a single candle in the darkness; renewal, and releasement. Both are also about one's connection with nature and the seasonal cycles.

Matariki is the start of the Maori New Year. It is the coldest time of the year. Crops, especially the kumara, have been harvested, with stores now full. Too cold to plant, it is a time for reflection and giving thanks for the harvest that the gods – and ancestors - have provided. In the same way, the winter solstice marks the New Year for many other cultures. Yule mythology tells this is the night when the virgin goddess awakens to find she is pregnant with the child of light, faith and hope. Ancients feared that the light might not return and so lit fires to appease the gods and provide energy to boost the sun's rays. Modern-day rituals involve the lighting of candles to encourage the return of the light, honour the continued love and support of loved ones in our lives who have passed over, and the power of the child of light and the spirit world to support us during winter-like times. Likewise, at Christmas, we light candles to symbolise Christ's light in the darkness; the hope of renewal and new life, and the knowledge that we are not alone in our trials. Candles are lit at Matariki to remember the ancestors, encapsulate the hopes and aspirations for the months ahead and, like all other winter solstices, to release pain and disappointments from the year that has now passed. Like the Christ-light at Christmas, candles at Matariki remind us of the seven stars of the mother (Matariki) and her six daughters.

Reflection for the Gathering

Ever suddenly been left in the dark? Suddenly found yourself groping around trying to find a light-switch or a flashlight or a candle? All the landmarks and guidance available when the light was on, have gone. You are left trying to remember what it is you usually see in the light, to navigate your way around the room. Things feel different, seem further away, or closer, as you bump into them! It is very disorienting. I wonder if the church at the moment is in the dark. We haven't arrived there suddenly, but, suddenly the Christian landscape is different, less distinct than before, more mysterious, above all, harder to explain to others. Pondering the story of Matariki, I remembered the story of the nativity star – a story within Christian tradition which resonates with starry Matariki. Both may be a clue to the darkness in which we find ourselves; a darkness more profound than winter solstice, but in which winter solstice can help us through its symbols and celebrations.

Stars in the heavens for the ancients were highly significant. For a start, the heavens were where the powerful sacred forces were thought to reside in the shape of gods. The stars were those gods moving about. Or, they could be the eyes of ancestors watching over those still living. Looking up on a night when there is no competing light is an awesome and powerful experience. Psalm 8 expresses some of this awe as the psalmist speaks to the God he believes is almighty and powerful: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is humankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?"

I remember clearly a drive home between Dunedin and Gore about 30 years ago. Not far after Balclutha (which is halfway on the journey), the road follows a ridge of rolling farmland. The stars were bright; sharply defined in an inky black sky. There seemed, however, to be something else going on. So I stopped the car in the middle of nowhere on this ridge road, got out, and looked up. There was an amazing aurora show going on – a Sky Show to rival Matariki fireworks in Wellington City. The light was pulsing and moving, seeming to be moving between two poles a little like iron filings do between two magnets. The sky was alive! If I had lived 2-3000 years ago I would have said the sky was alive with angels or heavenly messengers. As it was, I knew it was alive with photons of light formed as charged particles from the sun had collided with atoms and molecules in our atmosphere. Knowing that, it was no less awe inspiring. A great pity that I had to continue on. It was the best aurora display I have seen – more completely right across the sky than others I had viewed before or have viewed since. (You will understand when I was amazed that my niece planned an overseas trip to include seeing the Northern Lights in Iceland when this is right here in our own back yard, frequently viewed in southern skies.) It is no wonder the movement of the stars intrigued ancient Eastern astrologers we call Magi and also Maori skywatchers.

As well as the skies seeming awe-inspiring and consequently making us feel small, there is also an intimacy between us and our skies. I didn't realise this until I checked a northern hemisphere sky on Christmas carolling for the Southern Cross. I realised only in that moment (I was about 27 years old) that I always did that – whenever I can see the stars I automatically check for the Southern Cross. In the moment I realised I always did that, I also realised it wasn't there! Like the moments of homesickness I spoke of last week, this was another – I was under the 'wrong' sky! This wasn't 'my' sky. You may have similar experiences. So, we can understand the welcome Maori gave the Matariki constellation, the Pleiades, as it returned each winter. We can also understand the shock and surprise of the astrologers in Matthew 2 as they are pictured recognising something new in their skies.

The Pleiades (or Matariki) a substantial constellation, is mentioned frequently in ancient legendary talk. They are named in different indigenous cultures as widely diverse as the Celts, Hawaiians, Maori, Aboriginal Australians, Persians, Arabs, Chinese, Quechua, Japanese, the Maya the Aztec, the Sioux, the Kiowa and the Cherokee. Earliest known depiction of them is in 1600 BCE. They are mentioned in Hinduism, in the Hebrew Bible in the books of Job and Amos, and in Islam's Qu'ran.

The origins of the star described in Matthew 2 have been almost impossible to discover, suggesting this story is written for a completely different reason from historical accuracy. Long before Jesus' birth, the rise of great stars had been associated with the birth of the great and the significant – gods and emperors. This story of the Star of Bethlehem is a signpost to the life of Jesus saying – 'Watch! Look! Listen! Important and significant person arriving! Follow this man – not only follow this star.' The star provides a concrete object to signify the greatness of this birth, and involvement of eastern astrologer-scientists indicates that all peoples of the world need to search for this man's wisdom. All need to go on long and arduous journeys to find him and learn from him. 'Not only Jews but Gentiles also,' proclaims the symbolism of this story. In the same way, Matariki reminds us of what is important – what life force, what essential essence of our world needs preserving and commemorating each year. On its website, Te Papa has described individual characteristics Matariki celebrates in its 7 stars:

Tupu-ā-nuku is the eldest of Matariki's daughters. She spends her time with Papatūānuku tending to plants. She pays special attention to making sure they have everything they need to grow ... so they can produce *kai* food, *rongoā* medicine, and *kākahu* clothing materials. When we see her shining we are reminded that we all have our own special time and place, and to spend time growing our *pūkenga* strengths, as well as that of our friends.

Tupu-ā-rangi loves to sing. Papatūānuku takes her to sing for *te wao nui* the great forests, and all the children of Tānemahuta. Her beautiful voice revives the forest and all the other creatures, including the *manu* birds, and *mokomoko* lizards ... their *waiata* song, fills the world with joy. Tupu-ā-rangi learns these songs and holds them close to her heart. We learn from her the importance of sharing our gifts with others, and appreciating those shared with us.

Waipunarangi accompanies her grandmother to the waters – the oceans, lakes and rivers – where she prepares the children of *Tangaroa* god of the sea to feed the people. Papatūānuku also teaches her about how the water that spills down from *Ranginui* the sky father collects together to provide drinking water for the people, animals and plants. She also watches how the water is evaporated by the heat of *Tama-nui-te-rā* the sun into the clouds that cloak Ranginui, so that may rain once again. Waipunarangi knows that if you give to others, all that kindness will come right back to you, and it is this lesson that she shares with us.

Waiti and Waitā are Matariki's twins. Papatūānuku knew that they would be able to care for the smallest and fastest of creatures – because they too know about being a team. When insects work together, they can do amazing things. *Ngā pī* bees, for example, pollinate all the flowers so that the plants grow, and we have air to breathe. *Ngā pōpokoriki* ants build huge, complicated tunnel cities underneath the ground, and carry many times their body weight. When we see these two stars in the sky, we are encouraged to join in and support each other.

Ururangi enjoys racing all of her sisters to get to her kuia first. She claims the best spot on her grandmother's lap and wraps herself in her arms, settling in for her favourite stories. Her tenacity and excitement, along with the *awhi* hug and her *aroha* love, helps Papa to get into the right mood after the cold and darkness of *takurua* winter, to prepare with her older *mokopuna* grandchildren. Ururangi reminds us that a good attitude is always key to success. But what about **Matariki** you may ask? Well, she's doing what all good mothers (and other caregivers) do – watching over and helping out her *tamariki* children. With her support, encouragement, and supervision, they will be able to do their very best.¹

What seems to be an easily dismissed, simplistic and primitive story, is a reminder of the values after which we need to strive for a good world for all of us. A valid and valuable basis is provided for us to make some winter New Year resolutions; to be more kind, more loving, to work together with others, to look after the water and the plants and the people all together. Matariki would make a good political manifesto for a political party wanting to promote well-being! We talk about the post-medieval period being the Dark Ages, a time when superstition ruled, when art and culture were suppressed and when feudal power and control held down the underclasses. I wonder though, whether, after all its good effects, the Enlightenment hasn't belied its name and plunged us into another dark age, an age in which we reach only for reason and logic and depend only on intellect and empiricism. Just as the mythical Bethlehem star and the actual Pleiades/Matariki event herald the return of light in a dark sky, maybe we intelligent beings of the 21st century will have the wisdom to mine the great myths of our foundation stories for their wisdom, for their numinous joy, for the light they can shine even into the shadowed parts of ourselves. We can see the results of our Enlightenment world – the highest suicide rates we have known, opioid abuse, violence, alcohol over-use, fractured families, prejudice and despair, depression and anxiety and a wrecked environment. Enlightenment alone is not enough, it never has been, but for a brief few centuries there we thought we could go it alone; that we could do without the sacred which has always brought light into the shadows and consequently raised our heads so we could stand tall.

So let's welcome back the light! It is one of the six modes of salvation which Marcus Borg lines up alongside the atonement metaphor: Whatever metaphor you use, we need the light back again. The allowing of light back into dark places. The shining of sun into a darkened world each day. The sparkle of stars in a night sky. The pulsing beauty of photons dancing delightfully in the aurora. Open your heart and welcome back the Light.

Susan Jones 027 321 4870 minister@standrews.org.nz

¹ <https://www.tepapa.govt.nz/discover-collections/read-watch-play/maori/matariki-maori-new-year/whare-tapere/six-sisters>